

A.K. Ramanujan on Ancient Classics

Abstract

Ramanujan's views on old classics are remarkably original. For him translation is not only a change of language but also a new creation involving the creative role of the translator. Translation takes literature out of narrow boundaries and makes it universal. An accidental discovery of an old Jain text set off a chain of discoveries. A treasure of literature was discovered and interpreted. Old classics are relevant even today.

Keywords: Transport, Treasure, Unearth, Maxim, Non-Native, Rework.

Introduction

"Classics Lost and Found" is a significant essay by A.K. Ramanujan. It takes us out of the two great Sanskrit epics- The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* –and leads us to the world of Tamil literature. In the outset Ramanujan says that his aim is to connect the past with the present and to find out how both of them influence and modify each other. Ramanujan examines the discovery of old Tamil classics and their use by the poets in the new context. The past remains relevant long after it seems lost. When it is discovered it reaches us with fresh importance. Vinay Dharwadker pin-points:

The four essay on classical Tamil poetry that follow complicate this two-sided picture of ancient Indian literary practice by transporting us into a world that is not a Sanskrit or epic in origin or reference. 'Classics Lost and found', for instance, recounts the dramatic story of how, ironically, the Tamil people discovered and recovered their own classical poetics and poetry.¹

New Paradigms

The past gives new perspectives and ironies in the present. Ramanujan provides an instance of Shakespeare's history plays and some dramas by Girish Karnad and Vijay Tendulkar. He expresses that these playwrights have made a successful use of the past. They have used the past to interpret present day conditions. The two thousand Tamil poems compiled in eight anthologies are relevant in the present day context. They are poems of ancient time but they seem to have been written only yesterday. The past lives with us, modifies our lives and prepares the way for future.

An Accidental Discovery

The discovery of the old Tamil texts started in a dramatic way. The great Tamil scholar U.V. Ciminata Aiyar happened to meet a munsif Ramaswami Mudaliyar. The judge handed over him a manuscript discovered by the great European– Rev. Henry Bower. Both of them strived together to make out its meaning but found little success. Aiyar arrived at the inference that it was not a Hindu text but a Jain one known as *Civakacintamani*. This trifling incident was the beginning of the great discoveries of old Tamil classics. Ramanujan confesses the contribution of the European scholars to Indology:

Familiar names referred to unfamiliar characters. He read what he could to the judge, and they struggled with it together for six months. He had by now gathered that it was not a Hindu text at all, but a Jain text the *Civakacintamani* and he began to make inquiries about it.²

A Great Treasure

Aiyar's interest in the classical Tamil literature increased by degrees and he discovered numerous things which brought to light the great treasure which was hidden from human being. He ransacked the nooks and corners of libraries and old houses in search of the valuable manuscripts. he was aware of the fact that he was doing a great service to literature and to mankind. His findings introduced a new epoch of awakening in the Tamil society.

Naccinarkkiniyar's commentary on the *Civakcintamani* quoted several texts and authors for whom he gave no names, and this made Aiyar realise that there were many more classical Tamil texts to be found. He devoted the rest of his long life to roaming the villages, rummaging in private attics and the storerooms of monasteries, unearthing, editing and printing them.³



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Aiyar came across the eight Tamil anthologies in a dustbin. He had knowledge where the texts were to be found. He knew the fact that during the intermediate time of neglect these precious texts were thrown to dust. It was a time of ignorance in which literature lost its value for mankind. The time had come when these texts were to be restored and provided their respectable place. About the accidental discovery of the valuable Tamil anthologies

Ramanujan remarks

He also found a neglected bundle of palmleaf manuscripts in a corner, thrown together in a basket, and they were the eight Anthologies of classical Tamil, from which I have quoted above the elegy on the young warrior.⁴

The Great Significance of the Past

The past is not something dead and lost. It holds great value for the present. In fact, the present emanates from the past. The discovery and the appropriate use of the past in an indispensable part of modernity. The statue of the heroine of the fifth century epic on Marina, Beach, maxims from old texts near the drivers' seats in the buses and old texts in the syllabi of colleges and universities establish the permanent value of the past. In fact, the past is the basis on which the edifice of the present stands:

Maxims from a Tamil text on ethics of the fifth or sixth century are painted near the drivers seat of public buses. A statue of the heroine of a fifth century epic stands on the through fare on Marina Beach near the university of Madras. Poems of ancient Tamil bards are standard subjects of college syllabi.⁵

The Art of Translation

Aiyar's discoveries generated an interest in the past. Scholars took up the task of the discovery and translation of the ancient texts. Ramanujan mentions George Hart along with his own name. He knows the importance of the art of translation. It is an act of transporting. Ramanujan proved himself as a great translator of the Tamil and the Kannada poetry. For him translation is not only a change of language but also a new creation involving the creative role of the translator. Translation takes literature out of narrow boundaries and makes it universal

Translators like George Hart and I, almost a century after Aiyar's fateful meeting with the *munsif*, are now reading and translating the Tamil classics. The word *translate*, as you know, is only Latin for the Greek word *metaphor*. Both mean 'carry across'.⁶

Ramanujan translate U.R. Anatha Murthi's famous novel *Samskara* into English. This translation is as good as an original creation. In the "translator's note" Ramanujan observes that the true aim of a translator is to make a non-native reader a native one. Ramanujan has succeeded in achieving this. The following words are suitable in this reference

A translator hopes not only to translate a text, but hopes to translate a non-native reader into a native one. The notes and afterword are part of that effort.⁷

Conclusion

Tirumurukarruppatai is the first great discovery of Aiyar which started the chain of discoveries. It is a religious poem dedicated to Lord Murugan. The discoveries have enriched the Tamil

literature wonderfully since then. Fred Clothey wrote a thesis on Murugan, his temples, icons and texts. The work of translating and editing has a bright future. Ramanujan concludes the essay by emphasizing that both past and present rework each other very significantly.

References

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2. Ibid, p.187
3. Ibid, p. 188
4. Ibid, p.189
5. Idem.
6. Idem.
7. Ramanujan, A.K. trans. *Samskara*. New Delhi: Oxford University, Press, 2002, p.viii.